DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 220 738 CG 016 143

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TITLE The Formal/Informal Dimension in Perceptions of Counselor Dress. Journal Paper No. 232.
INSTITUTION Iowa State Univ. of Science and Technology, Ames. Dept. of Home Economics Education.
PUB DATE Jul 81
NOTE 14p.; Research supported by a grant (#772) from the Research and Development Fund, North Dakota State University, Fargo, ND, and a Faculty Research Grant, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, ND.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *American Indians; *Clothing; Counselor Characteristics; *Counselor Client Relationship; *Cross Cultural Studies; Evaluation Criteria; High Schools; High School Students; *Interpersonal Attraction; *Racial Differences; Two Year Colleges; Two Year College Students

ABSTRACT

Studies of the relationship of counselors' dress to clients' evaluations of counselors have been based on the assumption that the formal/informal nature of clothing is the essential dimension for assessing the meaning of counselor attire. Caucasian (N=226) and Sioux Indian (N=155) high school students and 193 Caucasian community college students were exposed to counselor dress stimuli that avoided a priori use of the formal/informal dress dimension. The consistently least preferred counselor dress was conservative, out-of-date attire. Indians preferred fashionable, up-to-date attire. Caucasians preferred informal slacks and sweaters. The results did not support the informal/formal dress dimension as a single explanation of students' differential preferences for counselors. (Author/JAC)

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ED220738

The Formal/Informal Dimension in Perceptions of Counselor Dress[1]

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July 1981

[1]Journal Paper No. 232 of the Home Economics Research Institute, College of Home Economics, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa. This research was supported by a grant from the Research and Development Fund (Grant #772), North Dakota State University, Fargo, ND and a Faculty Research Grant, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, ND.

CG 016143

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The Formal/Informal Dimension in Perceptions of Counselor Dress

The relationship of counselors' dress to clients' evaluations of counselors has been the subject of a number of research studies (Amira & Abramowitz, 1979; Drummond, 1975; Hubble & Gelso, 1978; Kerr & Dell, 1976; Raia, 1973; Schmidt & Strong, 1970; Stillman & Resnick, 1972). These studies have been based on the a priori assumption that the formal/informal nature of clothing is the essential dimension for assessing the meaning of counselor attire. When studies using the formal/informal construct yielded mixed results, the conclusion often drawn was that clothing has limited impact in differentiating clients' evaluations of counselors. This conclusion seems premature for several methodological reasons. First, counselor and clothing studies do not appear to have incorporated findings from the clothing research literature. This literature suggests that fashionability is a major dimension in the meaning of clothing (Gibbons, 1969; Johnson, Nagasawa & Peters, 1977) and that the perception of clothing is a more complex phenomenon than observation of the formal/informal dimension (DeLong, 1978; DeLong & Larntz, 1980). Second, the presentation of only two or three forms of clothing stimuli does not reflect the diversity of counselor attire found in most counseling settings. Perhaps clothing stimuli have not been sufficiently varied to register differential counselor evaluations. Third, with few exceptions, the content validity of the clothing stimuli has not been established as representative of the counseling setting. Finally, subjects used in research on counselor clothing have been college students. These studies have excluded subjects of high school age, a group for whom clothing is of prime importance (Creekmore, 1980; Kelly & Eicher, 1970; Littrell & Eicher, 1973;

Smucker & Creekmore, 1972), and minority group subjects who may have distinct perceptions of counseling interactions (Sue & Sue, 1977).

As part of a larger project several experiments were designed to assess variables related to clients' preferences for counselors (Littrell & Littrell, Notes 1 and 2). Included in these variables was the dress of the counselor. The experiments address the methodological limitations of previous counselor clothing research by selecting dress stimuli through procedures that avoided a priori use of the formal/informal construct and by diversifying the pool of subjects upon which conclusions about the impact of counselor dress could be based. The purpose of this report is a) to convey the consistent signficance of counselor dress in differentiating preferences for counselors among students from two races and three settings and b) to discuss the dress dimensions that appeared to explain these preferences for counselors.

Method

Subjects and Setting

Two experiments used subjects from three Upper Midwest settings; 226 Caucasian students from an urban high school and 155 Indian students from a high school on a Sioux Indian Reservation participated in Experiment One and 93 Caucasian two-year technical/community college students participated in Experiment Two.

Independent Measures

Independent variables for each experiment were a) sex of student, b) form of counselor dress and c) sex of counselor. Race of student was a fourth independent variable in Experiment One. In most circumstances Indian and Caucasian students attend schools with Caucasian counselors.

Accordingly, only Caucasian counselors were presented in the research (Dauphinais, LaFromboise & Rowe, 1980). The counselor dress variable consisted of a set of twelve color slides with a male or female counselor wearing one of six forms of dress. The six forms of male and female dress were objectively selected and validated in two stages. In Stage One, 43 recent high school graduates wrote descriptions of forms of counselor or teacher dress present in their high schools. When coded, these descriptions collapsed into 18 forms of male and female attire. Observations were then made at the schools involved in the research to verify the presence of these forms of attire among the counselors and teachers in the schools. In Stage Two, photographs were made of the 18 forms of attire. Twenty students, not included in the experiments but from similar schools, identified pairs of analogous male and female dress from the 18 photographs and provided phrases descriptive of their perceptions of the clothing. Six pairs of dress emerged with 75% or higher agreement as to dress similarity and naming (see Table 1). The remaining dress forms were eliminated. Each slide excluded the head; physical features were controlled by the use of one male and one female Caucasian model who were similar in skin coloring and body structure.

Insert Table 1 about here

Dependent Measures

The instrument for measuring students' preferences for counselors consisted of a questionnaire containing three phrases. The first phrase, indicating a personal concern, was "If you had a personal problem and decided to talk with a counselor, how would you feel about talking with

this counselor about your problem?" Similarly worded items asked about a school problem (academic concern) and plans after graduation (vocational concern). Students indicated their preferences for counselors by rating their agreement to the phrase "would want to talk to this counselor." Students rated each phrase on a five-point Likert-type scale that ranged from one, "strongly agree" they would talk with this counselor to five, "strongly disagree." The five-point scale was chosen, following testing and evaluation by English teachers at the schools, so as to accomodate some students with very low reading and comprehension ability.

Procedures

Slides were shown in English and psychology classes in the schools. Use of students from these required courses helped insure inclusion of subjects from all grade levels and fields of study. Each of the 25 classes observed four or six randomly selected slides. Male and female counselor slides were alternated. Slides were randomly distributed across classes within each setting. As each slide was shown the students rated the counselor on the three phrases using the questionnaire. A separate sheet was used for rating each counselor.

Data Analysis

Because of somewhat different data collection procedures in high school and community college settings, the data were not treated in one analysis. Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used because the three dependent variables, personal, academic and vocational conerns, were assumed to be correlated (Biskin, 1980; Leary & Altmaier, 1980). Experiment One used a 2 X 2 X 6 X 2 MANOVA (Sex of Student X Race of Student X Form of Dress X Sex of Counselor); Experiment Two, a 2 X 6 X 2 MANOVA

(Sex of Student X Form of Dress X Sex of Counselor). Only when the overall multivariate F's were significant were the univariate analyses of variance (ANOVA) computed for each dependent variable using Wilks' lambda criterion (Huck, Cormier & Bounds, 1974). The F ratios that were significant with the separate ANOVAs were examined further using Duncan's Multiple Range tests. The level of significance for all analyses was set at .05.

Results

One purpose of this report was to identify the consistent importance of counselor dress in differentiating client preferences for counselors under conditions designed to improve on methodological limitations of previous counselor clothing studies. After MANOVA's were run in each experiment, the subsequent univariate analyses revealed strong statistical differences ($p < .0001$) in students' preferences for counselors based on the counselor's attire. Multiple comparisons are shown in Table 2. No other main effect or interaction in the larger study was consistently significant across the six univariate analyses.

Insert Table 2 about here

Twice the students' preferences for counselors formed two groups based on dress; six times, three groups and one time, four groups. The three or four way differentiation of counselors in seven of the nine analyses supports the need for presentation of more than two levels of dress when conducting counselor dress research. The students in this research differentiated the counselors in more than a dichotomous manner when multiple dress stimuli were presented.

A second purpose of this report was to discuss the dress dimensions

that may be associated with the differential preferences for counselors. The consistently least preferred counselor wore form #6, "conservative, out-of-date" attire, while the most preferred counselor among the Indians wore form #1, "fashionable, coordinated, up-to-date" attire. As compared to previous research, these forms of dress would be considered formal in nature since both included dress slacks and shirt, tie and suit jacket or sweater jacket for men and a skirted or pants suit for women. In two cases the Indian's least preferred form of dress did not differ from their preference for informal slacks and sweater. The Caucasians' most preferred form of dress, the informal slacks and sweater, often was grouped with forms #1 and #2, both formal suits. In summary, results of these experiments do not support the formal/informal dress dimension as a single explanation of students' differential preferences for counselors.

How might these students' preferences for counselors be conceptualized as a basis for further research? Examination of the forms of dress at the two preference extremes provides a basis for recommendations. For Indian students, an up-to-date/out-of-date or fashion dimension seems worthy of further investigation. Perception of the new/old qualities of clothing is also recommended for further study. For Caucasian students the recommendations are less clear. A counselor in out-of-date formal attire was least preferred. However the preferred counselors were dressed in both formal classic and formal fashionable attire. Clothing stimuli that present the dimension of fashion in combination with the dimension of formality seem warranted for further clarification of the Caucasians' perceptions of dress.

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Table 1

Descriptions of Dress Pairs Formed and Named by Students

Slide Pair Number	Student Descriptor	Female Dress	Male Dress
#1	"fashionable, coordinated, up-to-date"	3-piece blue pin-stripe suit with slacks, vest and jacket; white blouse; striped scarf	3-piece blue pin-stripe suit with slacks, vest and jacket; white shirt; dotted tie
#2	"traditional, conservative"	brown velvet blazer; brown/orange plaid skirt; tan turtle neck sweater; fashion boots	brown tweed sport coat; green corduroy slacks; white shirt; plaid tie
#3	"young, casual, comfortable"	black slacks; white wrap sweater; small print blouse	black slacks; white crew-neck sweater; small print shirt
#4	"feminine for women; leisure look for men"	off-white satin, long sleeved low-necked ruffled blouse; green/ brown/orange flowered skirt	off-white polyester leisure suit; brown/ orange flowered body shirt

Table 1 continued

#5	"western"	denim skirt and jacket with western details; red/white dotted blouse	denim slacks and vest with western details; multi-colored plaid shirt
#6	"conservative, out-of-date"	brown/white plaid suit with box-style jacket buttoned to neck and pleated skirt; white blouse	brown narrow leg slacks; brown/green large print button down front sweater; white shirt; brown/ orange large print tie

Table 2

Multiple Comparisons of Forms of Dress for Personal, Academic and Vocational Concerns in Three Settings

Setting	Dress # and mean	Personal concerns					
Indian H.S.	dress #	1	3	5	2	4	6
	mean	2.66	2.85	2.85	2.98	3.07	3.73
Caucasian H.S.	dress #	3	4	1	5	2	6
	mean	2.62	2.81	2.89	2.95	3.16	3.34
Technical/ Community College	dress #	3	5	2	1	4	6
	mean	2.25	2.34	2.47	2.58	2.71	3.31

Setting	Dress # and mean	Academic concerns					
Indian H.S.	dress #	1	2	5	4	3	6
	mean	1.99	2.08	2.15	2.26	2.53	2.92
Caucasian H.S.	dress #	3	1	4	2	5	6
	mean	1.93	2.21	2.26	2.39	2.40	2.46
Technical/ Community College	dress #	3	2	5	1	4	6
	mean	1.95	2.00	2.07	2.12	2.29	2.73

Setting	Dress # and mean	Vocational concerns					
Indian H.S.	dress #	1	2	4	5	3	6
	mean	1.74	2.13	2.17	2.18	2.55	2.78
Caucasian H.S.	dress #	3	1	4	5	2	6
	mean	1.90	2.06	2.13	2.14	2.34	2.40
Technical/ Community College	dress #	3	2	1	5	4	6
	mean	2.00	2.05	2.10	2.20	2.41	2.76

Note. A line under two or more forms of dress for a type of concern indicated that the forms did not differ at the .05 level using Duncan's Multiple Range test. A rating of one equals "strongly agree" the student would want to talk with this counselor while a five equals "strongly disagree".